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ABSTRACT

Teachers at Western Illinois University help improve the self-image of students in college remedial English courses in the following ways: (1) they try to alleviate students' feelings of failure through such methods as stressing the acceptability of spoken dialects but pointing out the practical need for writing in Standard English, and emphasizing the teacher's role as helper; (2) they free students from their inhibitions about writing, by having them write constantly, providing quick feedback, and beginning with easy kinds of writing such as free writing, purposely bad writing, and personal writing; (3) they convince students they can think by helping them think through a problem, write a thesis statement, and develop supporting points; (4) they give students confidence that they can master mechanics, teaching only the absolute essentials of grammar, using little terminology, and helping students learn rules through practicing their use in sentences; (5) they help students learn responsibility through checking their mastery of daily assignments and insisting that all assignments be completed at the expected time; and (6) they let students feel successful by making certain that each student has at least one paper read aloud during the semester. (GW)

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IMPROVING THE REMEDIAL STUDENT'S SELF IMAGE

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Almost every student who is required to take remedial English, or Standard English as we prefer to call it, comes to the course with a poor self image. He didn't do well in high school English, and now in college he has been shot down again because his low ACT score has landed him in Remedial. He's ashamed and disheartened.

What can we do to improve his self image? We're not psychotherapists, but we must do something. More important than teaching him where the commas go is helping him gain a modicum of self respect.

At Western Illinois University we do six things that seem to help.

First we try to alleviate the student's feeling that he's a failure. We begin by saying, "Everybody's good at something, and English just isn't your thing. Perhaps your thing is math or sports or music or mechanics. English may not be your thing just as mechanics isn't mine. I have no idea how a carburetor works or why valves have to be ground or piston rings replaced. And yet I get by.

"Likewise many people get by very well without knowing much about English. Lots of good careers don't require a knowledge of English. A top mechanic or an electrician can get by without it. In fact some of you may decide eventually that English, and college in general, just isn't worth the bother. It's certainly possible to have a good life without a college education.

"But if you do intend to finish college, you'll need to learn something about writing. And even if you don't plan to finish, it's a good idea to learn a few things about writing because some day you may have to write an application or a report, and you'll be glad if you can be proud of what you write. Besides, this course will help you to think, and that's important for everybody."

Then we say that the course teaches Standard English, the English that people all over the world write, and that it may differ from the dialect the student speaks, particularly if he comes from the South or the East or a black community. We say that former President Kennedy spoke a dialect, saying dollah for dollar, idear for idea, and Cubar for Cuba, but that he wrote Standard English, as we all must do. And we emphasize the social and economic values of being able to write the standard dialect.

We also say that frequently after a student has learned to speak and write Standard English, he goes back to his home community and is able to slip back into his old dialect while he is there. Thus he has really become billingual, able to use two languages--or at least two dialects.

In trying to alleviate the student's feeling that he's been a failure, we accentuate the positive. If a homely girl came into my class, I wouldn't say, "You certainly are homely. Let's see what we can do about it." And yet many of us have been guilty of just that when we say, "You certainly have problems with writing, don't you?" Throughout our program, instead of pouncing on the errors, we try to pounce on the possibilities. During our first student conference we say, "Hey, I think you have something interesting to say on that subject." Getting the student to want to write is half the battle.

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As well as assuring him that he hasn't been a failure, we assure him he's not going to be a failure in this class. To do this, we convince him that we're on his side. It may be the first time he's ever thought of an English teacher as anyone but an enemy, "someone who finds fault with your writing." We try to change that designation to "someone who helps you with your writing."

The first day of class we say, "I'm here to help you. Your job is to learn to write well enough to pass the final essay exam. Unfortunately I won't be grading that essay. It will be read by a committee of English instructors who will decide whether you are ready for a regular composition course. My job is to help you prepare yourself to write that essay." Thus the instructor becomes the ally rather than the adversary of the student.

To borrow a phrase from Transactional Analysis, we try to show the student not only that he's OK but that we're OK too. He can trust us. We like him, We're on his side.

The second way we help the student improve his self image is to free him from his inhibitions about writing. To do this we let him start writing at once. Just as the music department doesn't make the student work for months on scales and five-finger exercises before allowing him to play his instrument, and the art department doesn't make him spend an inordinate amount of time drawing lines and forms before letting him paint a picture, so our program, instead of making him spend hours on grammar or on reading about writing, lets him begin to write at once.

He needs to write and write and rewrite. In preparation for each class hour he writes either a complete thesis statement, a rough draft, a final draft, or a revision. Some papers are written in class, some out of class, the first ones half a page, the last ones a full five paragraphs. And every paper he turns in is returned to him the next class period--before he has forgotten about it or lost interest. The papers have to be marked sometime, and we have found "tonight" as good a time as any. Doing our homework on time is an incentive to him to do his.

He begins with free writing, which we assure him no one will ever read. It may be his first experience with free writing, and he finds it satisfying to put down ideas without worrying about errors.

His next assignment is to do some bad writing--a page about his first morning at college using as many clichés as he can crowd in. He doesn't know what a cliché is at first, but immediately he catches on and gets some satisfaction out of writing the wrong way. That assignment, incidentally, does wonders to rid his future writing of clichés.

Next he begins to write about material he's familiar with. Instead of asking him to write about literature, which he may not understand, or about essays, which may not interest him, we let him first write about himself--an account of a significant incident in his life or a moment he'd like to live over, a discussion of what he could do to get along better with someone he's at odds with, a problem he's trying to decide, a letter to his parents telling them what they did wrong or right in bringing him up. He can succeed in these assignments because he has deep feelings about them, and he isn't at a loss for specific details. After writing a couple of these papers successfully, he loses his inhibitions about writing.

The third way we help him improve his self image is to convince him he can think. This opportunity comes when he moves on from personal writing to persuasive writing.

All writing, we tell him, is really persuasive writing. Whether he is discussing an aspect of drug control or describing a sunset, he is trying to persuade his reader of something, and that something must be stated in one sentence and then backed by two or three points, each of which goes into its own paragraph. Working in this way on an entire paper teaches him more about organization and thinking than working endlessly on sentences or paragraphs, which can be boring and often lead nowhere. (Frequently classes bog down on sentence combining or paragraph construction and never do get on with the real business of writing a paper.)

Once he has learned to think through a problem until he can write a thesis statement with supporting points, he finds that having to write a paper no longer floors him. He knows how to go about it. Often his writing in the past has failed to communicate not so much because he transgressed the rules of grammar as because he was unable to organize his thoughts logically. Learning to write a thesis statement, backed with supporting points, is the single most important thing we teach.

When he leaves college, he may not have much use for the rules of grammar, but he should be able to use what he has learned about thesis statements. He should say, "I'm going to vote for that candidate because and because and because; or I'm not going to vote for that bill because and because and because." In other words the real reason for our emphasis upon writing is that it teaches the student to think a problem through. As Hayakawa says, a person doesn't know anything clearly unless he can state it in writing.

Fourth, we give the student confidence that he can master mechanics. To do this we teach the least grammar possible, thus convincing him that what he has to learn is finite and that he can encompass it. When he hears the first day that he isn't going to have to bother with most of the things his high school teachers talked about, he comes alive; and when he hears the name of the textbook, THE LEAST YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT ENGLISH,[1] he gets the idea that maybe for once an English course won't be beyond him.

To many people Back to Basics means Back to Grammar--back to the good ol' days when students diagrammed sentences and said "With whom did you dance?"

We can't go back to those days. Anyone today who said "With whom did you dance?" wouldn't get many dances. When the students come to us from high school, unable to write, we can't chuck them into a bonehead class and try to pound into their heads more of the same stuff they've been refusing to learn for 12 years. They know there's no sense in learning all the niceties of grammar their high school teachers tried to teach them. They know it won't make any difference a couple of years hence whether they can tell a direct object from an indirect object or a gerund from a participle.

And we know it too. For research has shown that the study of grammar, whether traditional or transformational, has virtually no influence on writing skills.[2] In

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[1]Teresa F. Glazier, The Least You Should Know about English (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977).

[2]W. B. Elley, "The Role of Grammar in a Secondary School English Curriculum," Research in the Teaching of English, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Spring 1976), 5-21.

fact teaching too much grammar may even be harmful because it will usurp time the student should spend on writing.[3]

To make our presentations as simple as possible we use little terminology. As Gary A. Sutton has said, "The emphasis should be on usage rather than on terminology. . . . Other than the very basic grammar terms, grammar terminology might best be reserved for the class in linguistics."[4] Students need not know the grammatical labels for words and phrases and clauses in order to use them effectively. We never mention adjectives or adverbs or predicate nouns. A conjunction is simply a connecting word, an antecedent is the word referred to, gerunds and present participles are ing words, and a parenthetical constituent is an interrupter. The student works with words he knows rather than learning an extensive vocabulary he'll never use again.

He does need to identify subjects and verbs and clauses so that he won't write run-ons and fragments. He needs to know that a modifier (never mind its name) goes close to the word it modifies. He needs to know there are two kinds of pronouns--the subject kind (used as a subject or as a word that means the same as the subject) and the nonsubject kind (used for everything else). He needs to know that like ideas are put in parallel form and that he must not shift time or person. He needs to know a dozen rules of punctuation and capitalization, and of course he needs to learn to spell common words and to make contractions and possessives. But that's about all.

We don't teach a lot of out-dated rules. Ask any student what he learned in high school English, and he'll probably tell you he learned you mustn't start a sentence with and or but and that you mustn't end it with a preposition. Somehow it's such rules that students remember, so we are careful to teach only the absolute essentials. We don't teach split infinitives or who and whom or the subjunctive or the possessive before a gerund. We say that It's me and It's us are established usage and that It's him and It's them are fast becoming established. It's no use to fight battles that are going to be lost anyway. When students find out we aren't pedants, they are more likely to take seriously the rules we do insist upon.

We avoid lengthy explanations. We simply present a rule and say, "Now learn it by using it in one hundred sentences." The student does ten sentences at a time, correcting them by the answers at the back of the textbook, thus teaching himself as he goes.

We explain that it's not enough to understand a rule, that he must practice it until he can use it automatically. We say, "It's as if you said to a basketball coach, 'I understand how to make baskets.' He'd tell you to get out there on the court and shoot a hundred baskets. And so with grammar. It's not enough to understand how possessives are made. You have to make possessives in a hundred sentences. Then you should be able to make them correctly ever afterward."

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[3]Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones and Lowell Schoer, Research in Written Composition. (National Council of Teachers of English, 1963), p. 37-8.

[4]"Do We Need to Teach a Grammar Terminology?" English Journal, Dec. 1976, 37-40.

As the student works through the simple rules and gets more and more of his sentences correct, he comes to have confidence that he can master the mechanics of writing.

Fifth, we help the student see himself as a responsible person. By insisting that he complete his daily assignments, we show him that he can be a worker. No one checks to see whether he does his one hundred sentences for each rule, but at the beginning of each class period we give a one-sentence test. For example, when the assignment has been Words Often Confused, we dictate the sentence "They're going there with their son." If the student can get those three words correct, we know he has mastered the day's assignment, and he gets a little mark in the record book. He comes to see that doing his hundred sentences each day enables him to pass those sentence tests. We teach the Least, but we insist that the Least be mastered. By making the course rigorous, we shove him into taking responsibility for his performance. Tests cannot be made up, and late papers are never accepted, regardless of the reason. We explain that we allot a certain time to reading and recording a set of papers, and that we haven't time to do an odd one later. We will read a late paper during an office hour, but the student forfeits credit. It's amazing how our Draconian rule gets those papers in on time.

Gradually the student comes to see that work is necessary, and he often admits that he is working at English for the first time in his life. And perhaps for the first time in his life he is assuming responsibility for his performance.

To make sure that all our sections are equally rigorous, we present a united front. All of us in the program teach from the same syllabus, give the same assignments, give tests on the same day, and mark papers in the same way. To make sure we stay together, we meet for an hour a week to discuss what we have done and what we plan to do. Far from considering that hour an encroachment on our busy schedules, we consider it a valuable investment. We don't want students to say, "Don't take his section. He's tough. Take hers. She's easy." Within the program, though, there is still ample room for indulging our individual whims in teaching.

And we do get some results. When our students go on to regular freshman composition, they make a C average, which is good considering the shape they were in when they came to us.

One freshman composition instructor said this about our students:

> They're doing better than many of our regular freshman. They still use some fragments and run-ons, but their papers are well organized, with good thesis statements and concrete details. And the big difference is their attitude. They hand their papers in without fail. They come to class confident, ready to learn, willing to receive criticism, open to the possibility that they can improve. Something good must have happened to them in Standard English.

Students are finding the course acceptable too. Frequently a student says, "Why didn't they teach us this way in high school? Taking Standard English is the best thing I ever did."

The sixth and most important thing we do for the student is to let him taste success. On every paper he hands in we write an encouraging remark. His ultimate success, however, the real booster of his self image, comes when one of his papers is read

to the class. Nothing else we can possibly do for him will equal that experience. We create a trusting community in the class by reading only papers that are praiseworthy and by never identifying the writer. We keep a careful record of papers read aloud to make sure that each student has at least one paper read during the semester, one opportunity to think well of himself.

Last spring a young man who had been in my Standard English section more than a year before saw me on campus and said, "Remember me? You liked that paper I wrote in your class, the one about cross-country skiing. That was the first time in my life any writing of mine was ever read aloud to a class. . . or praised by a teacher."

Self image? That student and many like him have now come to believe in themselves as possible, rather than impossible, writers.